Kombucha and Pregnancy: Answers to Your Brewing Questions

Kombucha: fizzy, fermented, and full of probiotics. Some people drink kombucha for its fun effervescence and wide range of fruity flavors. Others, for its alleged health benefits ranging from improved digestion to lowered blood sugar. The increasing popularity of kombucha has not surprisingly led to an increased number of inquiries to MotherToBaby about the safety of drinking it during pregnancy. Carly, a recent visitor to our online chat service, explained that she had been drinking kombucha for years, but now that she was trying to get pregnant was it okay to keep drinking it? Great question! I'll share here what I talked about with Carly.

But first, what is kombucha? Kombucha is a sweetened green or black tea fermented with a symbiotic colony of bacteria and yeast, otherwise known as a SCOBY. Symbiotic means that the bacteria and yeast work together in balance. If you've never seen a scoby, let me give you a visual: a pale, rubbery, gelatinous disk vaguely resembling some sort of extraterrestrial organ. Not something most people would find appetizing from the get-go! But once the scoby is added to sweetened tea and left to ferment for a period of weeks, the result is a tangy, bubbly beverage that is slightly alcoholic, which brings me to the first consideration I discussed with Carly about drinking kombucha in pregnancy.

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Alcohol

Kombucha contains alcohol as a natural by-product of the fermentation process. In the United States, beverages containing 0.5% or more alcohol by volume (ABV) are required to have a label that includes a health warning for pregnant women. Varieties with lower alcohol content (less than 0.5 % ABV) are not required to have the label. Nevertheless, the non-labeled varieties still contain alcohol. For non-pregnant women, these small amounts of alcohol do not have a known risk; but in pregnancy, the advice of major medical organizations is to avoid alcohol altogether. Especially since the alcohol content of kombucha is not always clear-cut.

Most of the time, the manufacturing process can stabilize kombucha after it is bottled. However, kombucha has been pulled from shelves in the past after it was discovered that fermentation in the bottle did not stop, increasing the alcohol content above the amount that would require the pregnancy-warning label. And determining the alcohol content of homebrewed kombucha is difficult. Homebrews can reach as high as 3% or more depending on the type of yeast used in the scoby, how long and at what temperature the tea ferments, and other factors.

The best way to avoid unnecessary alcohol exposure in pregnancy is to not drink kombucha for those 9 months. And what about during breastfeeding? If you do enjoy an "alcohol-free" kombucha from time to time, the small amount of alcohol it might contain is unlikely to have a negative effect on your infant. Yet waiting a couple of hours after drinking the kombucha before nursing again will allow time for your body to metabolize the alcohol from your blood and breast milk.

Bacteria

Another concern about drinking kombucha in pregnancy is the possibility of bacterial contamination. Using proper sterile techniques can reduce harmful bacteria in the product, but the best way to eliminate any bacteria that might grow during the long fermentation process is to pasteurize the beverage with a quick heat treatment before bottling. Kombucha purists may argue that pasteurization destroys the probiotics responsible for the health benefits that kombucha may provide. However, unpasteurized products are not recommended in pregnancy due to an increased chance of foodborne bacteria such as listeria and salmonella, which can cause pregnancy complications. Unpasteurized products to avoid include certain milk and dairy products, and yes, fermented foods and beverages such as kombucha.

Homemade fermented foods carry an even greater risk of growing foodborne bacteria since the sterilization methods used at commercial facilities are not available in one's own kitchen. So when it comes to fermented products in pregnancy, store-bought selections that are pasteurized are the safest way to go. This means avoiding "raw" or unpasteurized kombucha, as well as homebrewed varieties.

Caffeine

A final consideration I discussed with Carly was caffeine. The general recommendation in pregnancy is to limit caffeine to about 200 milligrams (mg) per day. The caffeine content of kombucha can vary based on the type of tea used to brew it, and may fall somewhere in the 15-130 mg range. When calculating how much caffeine you're taking in, consider all potential sources including coffee, tea, soft drinks, and chocolate. The MotherToBaby fact sheet on caffeine lists the amounts found in some common products, and can be helpful for tallying up your daily intake (be sure to also check your product labels). For example, if you already drink a cup or two of regular coffee in the morning, a bottle of kombucha might put you over the recommended amount of caffeine for the day.

If breastfeeding, keep in mind that caffeine passes into the breast milk and can cause some babies to be irritable or have trouble sleeping. While you might not need to avoid caffeine altogether while breastfeeding, limiting the amount you take in can up the chances of a good night's sleep for both you and baby.

In the end, Carly decided that foregoing her beloved brew for the duration of her future pregnancy would be in the best interest of her developing baby. In the meantime, she'll opt instead for water to stay well-hydrated, and for carbonated fruit spritzers and juices when she gets a craving for the uplifting fizz that kombucha provides. Cheers to that, Carly!

Questions? Call 866.626.6847 | Text 855.999.3525 | Email or Chat at MotherToBaby.org.

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